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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1936
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1801
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: THE SOVIET GULAGS AND THEIR IMPACT
ON MODERN TURKMENISTAN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (B)
and (D).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Soviet "GULAG" system of work camps targeted the intelligentsia and those promoting an ethnic Turkmen identity during the 1930s through 1950s. Although little is known about the exact number of Turkmen affected, Stalin's purges undermined what educated population existed in the country, opening the way for Niyazov to easily further decimate the remnants of this group during his presidency. While President Berdimuhamedov is seeking to rebuild Turkmenistan's academic culture, the lack of a viable intellectual tradition is making his job tougher. END SUMMARY.

STALIN SENT MANY PEOPLE TO WORK CAMPS-- EVEN FROM TURKMENISTAN

12. (U) During the Stalin era, thousands of people were executed or died as a result of forced hard labor at work camps, most of which were located in Kazakhstan and Siberia. Like other Soviet republics, Turkmenistan suffered under brutal crackdowns against the intelligentsia, and those wishing to promote a more cohesive Turkmen identity in Central Asia. Although a minority of the population was targeted, they were often the most educated.

13. (U) There were two time periods during which people were rounded up and taken to work camps. The first was from 1931 to 1937. A number of individuals taken during this time period were held until after Stalin's death in 1953. The second time period was 1949 to 1950, which was often more brutal than the first period, according to family accounts.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS TELL OF FAMILIES DESTROYED BY THE GULAGS

14. (C) This history is not part of the history books, leaving only stories passed-down within families. One woman told us the story of her family during the Stalin era. Her family is ethnic Turkmen, and her grandfather, great-grandfather, and all of her great-uncles were taken to work camps. Her grandfather was taken during the first period, briefly released for treatment and then forced back to the work camps until 1954 -- approximately a twenty year-period.

15. (C) The prisoners' family was well-off and had connections to high-ranking people in tsarist Russia -- the great-grandfather sent all of his sons to Russia to the Imperial Schools to be educated. The family lived in the Mary/Merv area and, in the 1930s, all the men were arrested. This left the women to support their families. All of their property was confiscated, including land, valuables, and money. Our interlocutor stated that her family was not involved in any opposition activity. They simply said things that were not complimentary towards the new government and were arrested. Embassy local staff have noted that many arrests were based on false charges, especially in cases involving the intelligentsia.

16. (C) The male members of the family who were arrested ranged in age from their 30s to their 60s. The family has no idea where the great-grandfather passed away. He died while in the work camps. The other men were old when released. Our interlocutor's grandfather passed away within two years of his return. The youngest of the arrested brothers, a doctor who treated many of the work camp laborers while he was there, was the last to pass away. After the men were finally released, the family was left with nothing and moved to Ashgabat to start over where nobody knew their history.

THREE GROUPS SERVED AS TARGETS TO BE ARRESTED

17. (SBU) Few people outside of the affected families discuss these events today. In Turkmenistan, there were

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three types of people who were targeted:

-- The well-off, many of whom had ties to the former regime.

-- Those who promoted an ethnic Turkmen rather than a Soviet identity. They threatened the "Russification" campaign designed to promote a united Soviet Union.

-- Individuals who allegedly were actively participating in political activities outside of the approved and sponsored groups under the Soviets. As one employee stated, any alleged political activism that was confirmed by three or more people was enough for the NKVD, the predecessor of the KGB, to arrest that individual.

After 1954, persecution of these groups eased, especially against the intelligentsia. Towards the end of the Soviet era, Turkmenistan's intelligentsia began to rebound with the development of an achievement-based academic system.

THE INTELLIGENTSIA WAS UNDERMINED AND HELPED OPEN THE WAY FOR NIYAZOV

18. (SBU) Niyazov's regime had a definite anti-intellectual bent. His policies that decreased opportunities for and years of education had a negative effect on Turkmen society and created a generation of undereducated youth. In the early 2000's, Niyazov dissolved Turkmenistan's Academy of Sciences, arguing that the Academy's intellectuals were doing research with no practical value. This move started the former president's own depredations against Turkmenistan's intelligentsia and academic system, which led to the "Turkmenization" of the state employment and education systems and the virtual dismantlement of the achievement-based academic system that Turkmenistan inherited from the Soviet era. After the attack on the motorcade in 2002, Niyazov purged most of the government of its non-ethnic Turkmen professionals, who were also members of the intelligentsia.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Between the depredations of the Stalin era and those under Niyazov, Turkmenistan has been left with a weakened intelligentsia or academic culture tradition. This has left the country poorly equipped to meet many of the

challenges of the 21st Century. While the new president seems to realize the need to reestablish an academic culture -- and has already done much to try to address the country's shortcomings in this regard, including creation of a Supreme Council of Science and Technology and re-establishment of graduate-level programs -- he is doing so with few indigenous traditions that he can emulate. It will take years to reverse the effects of the bad policies of the Niyazov era.

END COMMENT.

CURRAN